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ABSTRACT

Administrators' classroom observation of teachers makes most teachers angry or fearful. An insufficiently used alternative method of obtaining a valid analysis of a teacher's abilities is to get objective information from the students themselves. This can best be done by a third-party interviewer who is not in a position of authority over either the teacher or the students. This person can randomly select approximately five students for an interview session of about one hour. He/she might first ask the students to share things they appreciate about the teacher, then ask them to cite problem areas. A general discussion should follow in which the teacher takes part. Three weeks later a second interview should be held with another group of randomly selected students. Often it is found that either the students or the teacher have subtly changed their behavior in the intervening weeks. The best way to wrap up the process is for the interviewer and teacher to meet a third time without students and for them to document what happened during the process. This kind of teacher evaluation fosters student involvement and trust in their own education, and is likely to win their respect because it offers the opportunity to improve their own conditions as involuntary recipients of teaching. (CD)

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THIRD PARTY TEACHER EVALUATION: A COLLABORATIVE DESIGN FOR INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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The remarks I am sharing with you today come out of a personal association and a variety of collaborative activities undertaken since 1967 with Dr. Howard Jones, presently at the University of Houston, Dr. Gene Hall at the University of Texas at Austin, and Dr. Nick Muto of Wellesley Public Schools in Massachusetts. We all were working on Title III and Title IV regional projects in Syracuse during the late 60's and have had the good fortune to continue our professional and personal interaction largely through the vehicle of the ASCD action labs and special sessions at the Annual Convention.

Before I get into the subject of using third party consultants to facilitate student feedback to teachers, I want to share with you some Dick Ford "state of the art" assumptions. I may generalize a bit, but hopefully my assumptions will be viewed, not as overstatements, but as representative of the way things are in a good many places, but not in all places.

Right off the bat I feel compelled to point out that the practice of direct observation of classroom teaching by building principals, curriculum supervisors, department heads or whatever, is generally viewed with skepticism if not outright fear, or anger by most teachers. All kinds of elaborate schedules, rating forms, post-observation conferences

SP009 901

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and teacher signoffs in triplicate exist to legitimize the process. Regardless of the sophisitication developed by committees of teachers and administrators, the traditional classroom observation, when described in teacher room talk is seen as meaningless, ridiculous, invalid, stupid, "what a waste, and if that S.O.B. just says once more that he thinks..." O.K. - enough on that! The point I want to make is that if teachers feel the observation is invalid - (and I agree with them) then any feedback based on that observation will not be perceived as reliable or helpful. The reasoning behind my saying that the traditional administrator-type observation is not valid is because it would be the exceptional classroom that wouldn't react emotionally and behaviorally to the presence of another adult who is recognized as being in an authority relationship to either the students and/or the teacher. In other words the situation immediately becomes artificial in most classrooms.

Before I get into this topic any further let me say that in no way today am I advocating elimination of the practice of direct observation of teachers by administrative personnel. We all know the quasi-legal bureaucratic basis for such observations and, far be it from me to suggest that we take this process out of the hands of the people delegated the responsibility to carry it out. What I do want to say is that the process has precious little influence on the improvement of instruction.

If teachers and administrators want to improve instruction through changing teacher-behavior, then the data which is given to the teacher must first be perceived by the teacher as being valid. Secondly,

that data must be given in such a way that the risk and effort required to change will be supported and affirmed by a person or persons whom the teacher trusts and respects.

Which brings us around to the point of my being here today, and that is simply that non-judgmental student data, systematically collected and processed is the most valid and trustworthy data a teacher could ever hope to have. After all it is the student's business to attend to school work and the consequences of teacher-student interactions for forty hours a week for nine months a year. And not only does a student recognize his own feelings, skills and knowledge, - he is always checking out and comparing other students' and other teachers' perceptions of teachers. Let me also hasten to point out that it commonly is on the basis of second-hand student data that parents often intervene to help administrators make decisions regarding student placement and/or teacher assignments, tenure and termination.

You will recall that I mentioned that student data needs to be non-judgmental - put simply that means not blame-placing - if it is to be valid. I firmly believe that most students, most of the time, desire better learning and living conditions in their school community even if they feel like captive prisoners in the institution. Similarly, I firmly believe that most jailed convicts, most of the time, desire better treatment and living conditions in their prison community. In other words, my experience has shown that students welcome the opportunity to help teachers improve the school environment in much the same manner as convicts welcome the opportunity to give feedback to the warden and prison staff regarding ways to improve their conditions for living and surviving in prison.

Before we go any further down this path - my guess is you are beginning to get a hint of where we are headed - let me say loud and clear that this is a voluntary activity for teachers and students - it starts off as an interesting and stimulating thing to do - with the initial impetus coming from one or more trusted professionals.

A second rationale for using student feedback to teachers, in addition to what I have just put before you, comes out of some recent work in the area of career education. I have been disappointed with much of the career education efforts. One significant dimension that I feel has all-too-often been overlooked is the fact that the world of work begins with kindergarten and generally extends uninterrupted for up to thirteen years for the typical student. It is in the school setting that the child and young adult acquires work habits and attitudes, values relating to competition, cooperation, collaboration (co-laboring), and attitudes relating to authority and supervision. What has been often missed in our career education thrust is the realization that nowhere in America is there a work situation which approximates the norms, behavior patterns, and reward systems, of the school system except within the educational system itself. One of the greatest challenges for a school system getting jazzed up on career education is to recognize that the product of the work - which is learning - ought to be achieved through a variety of management and organizational patterns that are more like real world work production systems and less like the "school larnin" production systems we have known in the past.

Coming back now to the student and the teacher getting ready to engage in some verbal feedback we need to remember that the student is both a worker - that is, he is in school to produce learning which can be

seen and/or measured. Some teachers have a very clear grasp on this notion - the student as a worker and producing learning that gets measured by quizzes, standardized tests, or whatever. However, others might say that the student is a client first - that he has needs and interests that must be met by the teacher and that the significant learning is that which results from fulfilling and satisfying the students' needs and interests.

Now I'm not fussy whether the student is viewed as a worker, client, queen bee or drone. What I am concerned about is establishing a climate in the classroom that will allow students to give input and consciously participate in managing some of the variables that determine the classroom learning and living conditions.

Seven Assumptions About Making Organizations More Rational, Liveable, Humane, and Productive

The seven assumptions that I am presenting have been used by our consultants in establishing trust and expectations in client organizations. The seven assumptions should be shared with teachers, administrators and students and referred to from time to time to check out what's going on. Organizations and groups (and I include classrooms) experiencing tension, conflict and/or poor communication are usually missing out on living out one or more of these assumptions.

1. Most people, most of the time, want to do the best job possible.
2. People need to be taken seriously.
3. Leadership can and should be a shared function.

4. People closest to the action are the best resources for information.

5. People need to be involved in planning and decisions which affect their activities.

6. When there is trust, there is validity in data; when there is low trust, there is low validity in data.

7. In the absence of shared objectives there can be no accountability... only justification.

If you can accept these assumptions you can begin to see a bit more clearly why I feel that non-judgmental student data has it hands down over administrative data as a means of improving instruction.

The Third Party Consultant/Interviewer

The third party person that facilitates the information gathering and sharing must be a person who has no authority relationship to either the students or teacher. The interviewer might be a teacher from another building, a neighboring district or college, or a skilled person from the community. Most important is selecting a person who can establish a climate of trust, frame questions and elicit responses that go beyond stating that which is already known or obvious. (See Guidelines for Framing Questions.)

Initiating the Feedback Session

The feedback session should be scheduled for about one hour in a location that will be free from interruptions by people or telephone. Four or five students should be randomly selected from the entire class - no more than a day prior to the interview. At the time the students are selected (drawn from a hat, every fourth name in the class register, persons with birthdays closest to the teachers' birthday) the class should be given a

brief explanation such as: "I am going to randomly select a few students who I want to take part in an interview with me. The interview is something I have volunteered for, along with some other teachers, who are interested in improving their teaching and we feel that students can really help us."

The Interview

At the interview it will be important for the interviewer, not the teacher, to be in control and establish the tone. Students must get into the feeling that they are going to be taken seriously. The interviewer should get the students first names early. No one but the interviewer should take notes, and then only to jot down key words or phrases which he may want to come back to. A good opener is for the interviewer to ask each student to share one thing he personally appreciates about the teacher. Moving from an opening round of statements which are non-threatening and affirming, the interviewer might then move to ask the students to share an item that "sometimes causes me problems, or makes me feel uncomfortable." Here it will be important that the interviewer establish the ground rule that students speak to their own feelings and experiences with the teacher - there should be no reference to others feelings or experiences with other teachers. During the interview, the interviewer should facilitate clarity in communication and foster a "talking with" rather than "talking at" situation. After a couple of going-around-the-group statements the interviewer should allow the students to pick up on questions as they wish in order that a meaningful and relaxed group discussion begins. In wrapping up the interview, the interviewer should let the students know that their openness has been helpful and

their time appreciated. Finally, the teacher and students should be given a few minutes to share how they felt about the interview, and contributes suggestions they might have for improving the setting or method. At this time they can give some feedback to the interviewer on his role.

Post-Interview Clinic

Immediately following the interview the teacher and interviewer should talk a bit about what was said and clarify any questions or statements that come out of the interview. The interviewer should assist the teacher in formulating and deciding upon some specific changes which can be initiated immediately in the classroom. An immediate and visible change is important to the process if the students are to know that their input was taken seriously.

The Change Dynamics

Several very interesting things generally take place immediately following the interview. First off, the students either go out and tell their peers of the interview experience or they are asked about what went on. (Incidentally, don't make the mistake of letting the students or teachers think that the interview was private and not to be talked about.) Typically the interview experience is unique, enlightening and needs to be shared by all. An interesting thing usually happens the very next day - the students who participated in the interview begin to behave differently, thus altering the classroom interactions in some unforeseen way. If, at the same time the teacher slips in a new behavior some very interesting things get set in motion. For example, it would not be unusual for students to publicly or privately acknowledge the

teacher's change and to verbally or non-verbally affirm the notion that "we've got a good thing going here." What begins to take place, for both the teacher and students, is a recognition of the interdependence which necessarily exists in improving the learning and living environment. Not only will the teacher get some strokes from the students, but the students who took part in the interview will and should get some credit from themselves and the teacher for their role in helping to create the change. Their improved sense of self-worth in contributing to the betterment of their "work world" may manifest itself in surprising instances in other classrooms and situations.

Followup

Approximately three weeks after the interview a second interview should be scheduled between the interviewer, teacher and another randomly selected group of four or five students from the class. At the second interview the interviewer once again sets the tone and summarizes what occurred at the first interview and asks the students to describe specific observed changes in the teacher's behavior as an outcome of the initial student feedback session. The interviewer then moves to a series of questions to draw out student feelings and observations which focus both on teacher and student bahavior. It will be interesting to note whether or not the second interview resulted in some good things happening for everyone, the second group of students typically will move quickly into sharing information that suggests an awareness of both teacher and group potency to bring about change.

The Ripple/Multiplier Effect

Take a look back now at the Seven Assumptions About Making Organizations More Rational, Liveable, Humane and Productive. At the conclusion of the second interview, the interviewer and the teacher should review these assumptions, check out what happened or didn't happen and how that information relates to the operational manifestations of the assumptions in the classroom.

Generally, we find that following the second group interview, the class and teacher move out more creatively with more trust, shared leadership, affirmation, and productivity. If good things are happening, not only will the teacher and class know it, it will also creep out to influence other norms and patterns and inter-relationships between teachers and students and between professionals in the building.

Wrapping The Process Up

The process just described is one of many viable ways to facilitate teacher evaluation and instructional improvement. This activity should not be institutionalized. If it works, teachers and students will respond creatively and sensitively to their own needs to build on the initial activity. The best thing an administrator can do is to let leadership emerge where it will and support it, but being mindful to resist the temptation of trying to structure it too quickly.

Generally the best way to wrap up the process is for the interviewer and the teacher to meet a third time without students to discuss the happenings after the second interview. Finally the interviewer and teacher should document what happened and what was learned through the process by the teacher and interview. This document then can serve as a reporting tool to share with other teachers, administrators, parents or the local Bicentennial coordinating committee.